Making Sense of Neologisms

By Isabel Verdaguer

Learners of English are usually taught only those words that are well- established in the vocabulary. However, language is in a permanent state of renewal and change. Language is the mirror to society and the vocabulary of English reflects the quick social, cultural, and scientific changes undergone by modern society. New entries are constantly added as speakers have to refer to new concepts, objects, and ideas, but very few textbooks, if any, contain newly coined words. Neologisms do not always appear in dictionaries, either, because they have to be used frequently enough to be found there. Nonce words, for example, those which are coined for a particular occasion, rarely earn a place in current dictionaries.

I think that it is not enough to teach learners only the words that already exist in the language. They must also be provided with tools that will allow them to understand the latest additions to the English vocabulary. Advanced learners should be taught the productive processes by which new entries enter the vocabulary so that they can make sense of the new words that they will come across. Teachers of advanced learners should acquaint them with the rules of word formation which native speakers intuitively apply to form new terms and understand those created by others. The knowledge of the patterns involved in word formation will help students to increase their vocabulary permanently.

In the vocabulary of English, verbs, nouns, adjectives and adverbs belong to open classes, that is to say, they are open because they can be extended indefinitely by the addition of new items. But these new words, save exceptions, are not created *ex nihilo* , but are either borrowed or formed by combining words or parts of words which already exist in the language, abbreviating them or changing their word class.

Speakers of English can easily coin new terms to suit their needs. Journalists, in particular, take advantage of the power that the English language has to generate new terms. When we read a newspaper or a magazine we are likely to come across words which we have never seen or heard before because they have just been coined by a creative speaker or writer. However, native speakers are perfectly able to process innovative word uses, and neologisms can be easily understood because they share the pattern of established words in the vocabulary. If *alcoholic* is familiar, then other words formed on the same pattern, such as *workaholic* or *shopaholic* , are also comprehensible.

Moreover, new words tend to be transparent in meaning. The sense of nonce words, in particular, has to be easily inferable. If learners know how new terms are formed and which patterns of word formation are prevalent today, they will be able to make sense of a great part of neologisms. Although using context clues is the most frequent means of understanding unknown words, in the case of neologisms we can teach learners to use clues which are provided by the words themselves. Mastering the rules which native speakers intuitively apply to form new terms and knowing which patterns of word formation show a higher productivity will help learners to make generalisations and to understand at least a significant part of newly formed terms.

New words can be coined by combining already existing words into a new unit (compounding) or a word with an affix (derivation), changing their word class (conversion or zero- derivation), abbreviating them (clipping, acronyms) and combining abbreviated forms (blending).

Compounding , combining two or more bases to form a new lexical unit is statistically the most productive process in English, since it is a characteristic word-formation strategy of Germanic languages. Most new compounds are formed combining two or more nouns. If a learner knows the meaning of the elements that form a compound, s/he will easily make sense of a fairly large number of compounds. There is little difficulty, for instance, in knowing the meaning of the following new combinations, once one knows the meaning of the separate elements. *Alcoholfree* , for instance, refers to a drink which does not contain alcohol, a *bodyscanner* is a scanner which produces images of the whole body, *cable television* is a system for transmitting television programs by cable.

Learners, however, must be aware of the fact that the meaning of the compound cannot always be interpreted as the composition of the elements alone. From a semantic point of view, the meaning of well- established compounds cannot be fully inferred from the meanings of the elements that form it since, with the passage of time, complex words become more and more specialized. In many cases, learners must become aware of the subtle semantic relationship between the elements that form the compound, and which give it a specialized meaning, not fully predictable from the meanings of the parts. An *oil truck* , for instance, is a truck that carries oil, whereas a *diesel truck* is a truck that runs on diesel fuel. Thus, an *expert* system is a computer system which uses software intended to work as a skilful consultant. This system, then, is founded on expert knowledge. A *convenience* store is a shop that has extended opening hours and is conveniently placed, and *convenience food* is food which is sold ready-to-eat.

Moreover, there are cases when it will be very difficult to derive the meaning of a compound. Even native speakers are unlikely to deduce its meaning from general principles. There are no rules that can account for the meaning of a semantically opaque compound. These compounds are said to be lexicalized. They cannot be processed by the mechanisms of meaning extraction because of extralinguistic associations which depend on the speaker's background, knowledge, or education. Whereas the meaning of *acid rain* , rain which contains harmful acid, can be easily inferred, it is impossible to deduce the meaning of *acid house* , which is a style of popular music, by just knowing the meaning of acid and house. The element *acid* probably refers to the drug LSD, and *house* is the abbreviation of Warehouse, which is the name of a nightclub in Chicago where this form of dance music originated. *Fern bar* is another good example. A *fern bar* referred to a bar in which expensive drinks were served to upwardly-mobile customers. These bars were usually decorated with hanging ferns, whence the name: a bar containing ferns. However, later on, a fern bar still referred to an expensive bar, but there were not necessarily ferns in the decoration.

Derivation or ***affixation*** , the addition of prefixes and suffixes to a base, has also been very common from the earliest stages of English. There are many traditional affixes that are still productive and are used to generate new words. For example, the negative prefix *un* (from OE un) is still one of the most common prefixes: *unfriendly* "unhelpful or harmful"; *ungreen* "not

concerned about or harmful to the environment"; *unwaged* "unemployed"; *unleaded* "not containing lead."

Although it is sometimes difficult to process the meaning of words that have been formed by affixation, new ones are generally transparent. Once one knows the meaning of the root and that of the affix, the combination can usually be easily predicted. Among the most common prefixes that are used to form new words we have:

anti- "in opposition to": *antipsychiatry* "a movement that rejects traditional psychiatry"; *antihero* "a central character who lacks the traditional heroic characteristics"; *antinovel* "prose fiction in which traditional novelistic elements are rejected." The prefix *anti-* can also be used in the sense of "preventing, neutralizing": *antifreeze* "liquid added to water to prevent it from freezing"; *antilock brake* "a braking system set up as to prevent locking and skidding."

de- "removal, reversal": *decommunize* "to remove communism from a country, to democratize"; *deforestation* "destruction of forests"; *de-acquisition* "to dispose of items in libraries, museums."

extra- "outside, outside the scope of": *extraterrestrial* "nonhuman being coming from other parts of the Universe."

multi- "many": *multilevel* "operating on several levels simultaneously"; *multicultural* "a community in which several cultural groups can be found"; *multimedia* "combined use of a variety of media technologies."

non- "negation, exclusion, refusal": *non-aligned* "a country which has not aligned itself with any superpower"; *non-dairy* cream "synthetic cream lower in fat and cholesterol than real cream"; *non-proliferation* "activity that prevents the spread of nuclear weapons."

post- "after": *post-bang* "belonging to the period after big bang"; *post-boomer* "a person born after the baby boom"; *post-viral syndrome* "debilitating condition which sometimes follows a viral infection."

There are also many suffixes that are productive and generate new words:

-able "fit for": *bankable* "certain to bring in a profit"; *microwavable* "which can be put into a microwave oven."

-dom "domain, realm, status": *yuppiedom* "the condition or fact of being a yuppy."

-er "agent": *channeler* "medium, somebody who communicates with spirits"; *afterboomer* "a person born in the generation after the baby boom"; *bagger* "one who puts customers' purchases into paper bags at the checkout."

-ee "recipient of an action": *secondee* "person who is temporarily transferred to another department"; *mentee* "person who is advised and guided."

-ette "female": *majorette* "a girl or woman who leads a marching band, twirling a baton"; "small" *superette* "a small store"; *launderette* "a selfservice laundry"; *leatherette* "material which simulates leather."

-ie *-y* in hypocoristic forms: *wrinklie* "an old person."

-ize/ise "causative": *marginalize/ marginalise* "to treat a person as marginal, unimportant, to relegate", *containerize/containerise* "to carry cargo in standard-sized containers", *pedestrianize/pedestrianise* "to convert a street for use of pedestrians only."

-ism "discrimination against": *ageism* "discrimination against elderly people"; *fattism* "discrimination against fat people"; also "system or body of principles; ideology" *greenism, environmentalism* "concern with the protection of the environment."

The lack of a clear dividing line between ***compounding*** and ***derivation*** is shown by ***pseudosuffixation*** and ***neoclassical*** compounds. ***Pseudosuffixation*** , as Lass (1987) calls this process, consists in using the second part of a word as a suffix to form new terms. This word-formation strategy is now very popular and used to coin informal terms. Among the most productive ones are:

-gate , derived from *Watergate* , has been widely used since 1972 to refer to scandals: *Irangate* or *Contragate*.

-(a)thon , meaning a large-scale event or activity, derives from *marathon* and has created, among others, *telethon* "a very long television programme whose main aim is to raise funds"; *workathon, sellathon, shopathon, bikeathon.*

-aholic "addicted to", from *alcoholic* , has been used to form *workaholic* "somebody addicted to working"; *shopaholic* "a compulsive shopper".

Whereas in a compound both elements are generally independent words, ***neoclassical compounds*** have at least one element of Latin or Greek origin which cannot occur as a free item. On the other hand, these forms carry a "higher density of lexical information" (Bauer 1989) than affixes and can combine with each other. One of the most productive combining forms today, is from Greek *tele-* "afar." Once one knows this it can easily be inferred that *teleshopping* means shopping from home using a computer and/or a telephone, *teleconferencing* means a conference held by several people linked by telephone, television or computer screens, and *telebanking* means conducting banking transactions electronically. Among other popular combining forms we have:

bio-, from Greek bios "life". It was first used in scientific terminology, but it now appears in many current terms: *biodegradable* "able to decay through the action of living organisms"; *biogas* "gas which derives from the decay of organic matter."

eco-, from Greek *oikes* "house" was also first used in science (*ecosphere, ecosystem*), and is now used in nontechnical terms which refer to the environment, ecological: *ecodefender* "one

engaged in the defense of the environment"; *ecocommunity* "a community living in harmony with the environment."

Conversion, zero-derivation or ***functional shift,*** whereby a word changes its part of speech, is also a common way of producing new words in the English language; i.e., by turning nouns into verbs or verbs into nouns. There are, among others: to *modem* "to send by modem" from the noun modem; to fast forward "to hit the fast-forward button of the remote control device."

Clipping, the shortening of a word by deleting some part of it, is another popular way of producing new words, especially nouns. Trying to guess the full form and using context clues effectively will be the best strategy to understand the meaning of a new clipped form: *decaf* (decaffeinated coffee); *enviro* (environmentalist); *sitcom* (situation comedy); *high tech* (high technology); *soap* (soap opera).

If we combine two clipped forms, we have a ***blend*** . Although blends are generally ephemeral, they are frequent in the language of journalism, advertising, and business. Again, a guess at the full forms and the use of the clues provided by the context will help us to deduce its meaning. Recent examples are: *advertorial* (advertisement + editorial); *affluential* (affluent + influential); *animatronics* (animated + electronics); *caplet* (capsule + tablet); *faction* (fact + fiction); *infomercial* (information + commercial); *infotainment* (information + entertainment); *chunnel* (channel + tunnel); *magalog* (magazine + catalogue); *monergy* (money + energy); *parasailing* (parachute + sailing), *fantabulous* (fantastic + fabulous).

Finally, ***alphabetisms*** or ***initialisms*** are words formed from the initial letters or from syllables from other words, pronounced as sequences of letters. Examples are *CD* "Compact Disc"; *PC* "Personal Computer"; *RPI* "Repetitive Stress Injury." ***Acronyms*** are ***alphabetisms*** pronounced as words. The word *yuppie* was a particularly popular and successful acronym in the eighties, on which model a number of other humorous acronyms were coined: *grumpie* (grown-up mature professional); *yuffie* (young urban failure); *woopie* (well-off older person). Other acronyms are: *WYS/WYG* (what you see is what you get); *dumbo* (drunken upperclass middle-aged businessman over the limit). This word-formation strategy is highly productive in present-day English, especially for names of organisations. However, we will not be able to offer much help to our students to interpret the meaning of unknown acronyms, if the context does not provide it.

To summarize, these word-formation strategies can be grouped into four types: *combining* (compounding, derivation, pseudosuffixation, neoclassical compounds); *shifting* (conversion); *shortening* (clipping and acronym); and *blending* . If we teach our students that many new formations are created on the basis of old words and that they can be transparent in meaning, they will be encouraged to understand a great number of new terms.

Isabel Verdaguer teaches in the English Department at the University of Barcelona, Spain. She is co-author of the English coursebooks Hands On!

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